RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Don

Roland Perry

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‘*The Don* is a sterling biography . . . it gives a riveting account of many of Bradman’s innings, and one can almost feel the excitement that gripped cricket fans when he strode out to bat.’

Herald Sun, Melbourne

‘Perry keeps a compelling pace in the work . . . The Don always let his cricket do the talking and so does the author. Perry brings to life the various innings with colourful and detailed descriptions of the shots, bowling and fielding . . . a good read and a handy bench-mark for all the modern hysteria about Brian Lara and Steve Waugh, two fine players whose averages and performances are but a shadow of The Don’s.’

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Australian Cricket Magazine

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The Blackpool Evening Gazette

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should be in every cricket library and has some superb photographs and many memorable quotes.'

The Birmingham Post

'*The Don* is a magnificent book. (Bradman's) story is wonderfully related by Perry – a monument both to his research and writing . . . Perry's joy in relating his greatest innings is infectious.'

Total Sport

About the Author

Roland Perry's books include the international best-sellers *Programme for a Puppet* and *Hidden Power*, about the strategy behind the election and presidency of Ronald Reagan. He has written other biographies on people as diverse as the radical Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett (*The Exile*), the espionage agent Victor Rothschild (*The Fifth Man*), actor/director Mel Gibson (*Mel Gibson: Actor, Director, Producer*) and cricketer Shane Warne.

The Don

The Definitive Biography of Sir Donald Bradman

Roland Perry

TO MY SON, ANTON

who on seeing his first one-day international game at the age of seven told me he would like to play for Australia – when he reached eleven. I told him this was a modest ambition.
W G Grace had played first-class cricket at nine.

PART ONE

PLAYER 1908–1928

1

THAT INNINGS

He was the original smiling assassin. Because he was small in stature, people underestimated his capacity to utterly destroy and demoralise an opposition. He enjoyed the challenge to tackle, beat and then obliterate every bowler he ever faced at every level of the game. From O'Reilly to Larwood, he delivered such fearful hidings that even those greats wished they had taken up other sports. He was the most gentlemanly, polite, ruthless and efficient sporting dominator who ever lived.
— TED A'BECKETT, AUSTRALIAN TEST PLAYER, FOOTBALLER AND DOMESTIC OPPONENT OF BRADMAN

CENTURION OF THE MORNING

ALL HEADS TURNED to the pavilion to see Don Bradman emerge into the thin, grey June light. The applause was respectful rather than rapturous. His previous knock of 254 at Lord's and his output of runs in the build-up to the Tests had earned him a sudden, awesome reputation, but he was still a largely unknown quantity for the knowledgeable, critical Yorkshire public. Bradman took his time on his now infamous funereal march out to bat after Archie Jackson had been caught by Larwood off Tate for one on the eleventh ball.

Bradman was never in a hurry, especially with Australia one for two on the first morning at Headingley in the Third Test of the 1930 Ashes. Many in the packed crowd, including a fourteen-year-old lad named Len Hutton, were aware that Bradman had scored four centuries against England in his

last five Tests. Each one had been a bigger and better innings than the last – 112, 123, 131 and then that ‘technically perfect’ double century at the home of cricket.

Would the twenty-one-year-old go one better again? His Lord’s effort had been hailed by many as the greatest Test innings ever. Yet still a few judges, such as the esteemed English journalist, Neville Cardus, were not convinced. They had stuck doggedly to assessments in the 1928–29 series in Australia, Bradman’s first against England. He was cheeky, chancy and unorthodox – a fortunate run-machine rather than a great batsman in the Hobbs-Hammond league.

Yet that 254 at headquarters had launched him into the British public consciousness, and cautious Cardus had finally acknowledged Bradman was something special. But many fine players had scored doubles in Tests. It was an extraordinary feat, truly heroic, but not quite the stuff of English cricket legend, to which Australians had already elevated the Boy from Bowral. Besides, one critic pointed out, the England team at Leeds now included the express bowler Harold Larwood and the accurate George Geary. The England attack was stronger than at Lord’s and would restrict him.

All the speculation and assessment were far from the batsman’s mind as he took block – middle to leg – an alignment that he considered lessened the chance of being trapped LBW. Bradman was more interested in the position of his stumps than most players. He made more use of the crease than perhaps any player before him, sometimes ending with a foot some way *behind* the stumps at the finish of a shot.

He didn’t just survey the field, he studied it. Bradman had what he called an ‘X-ray picture’ in his mind covering the position of every fieldsman before he played his first shot.

As he waited for Tate to deliver the first ball, he placed his bat between his feet – again something unusual. At the point of the bowler’s delivery Bradman moved his back foot

back and across. At the instant Tate let go the leather, the bottom of the blade was level with the top of the stumps. It was this preparation, coupled with his lightning feet, body movements and *fair* eyesight, that gave him technical and physical advantages over many other batsmen.

Even this was not the secret of his success. To those who played with and against him, it was the sheer determination that carried him further and faster than anyone in the history of the game. This grit and dynamic force could not be explained by a slow-motion camera, or a pointer on a blackboard. This was something intrinsic, like courage and the capacity for concentration, which a player either had or had not.

In typical fashion, Bradman clipped that first ball from Tate for two on the on-side. Two deliveries later Tate got an absolute pearler right through him and just missed his stumps. Undeterred, Bradman showed he was in an acquisitive mood, belting three fours in his first eighteen runs, which took him as many minutes. He batted from the first delivery as if he had a hundred behind him and stuck to his maxim – *if you don't lift the ball, you can't be caught*.

This kept the crowd enthralled as he strode to 30, 40 and 50. That first half-century was in the hurricane time of forty-nine minutes. The chart of his shots – the wagon-wheel – showed every stroke in the book and several that were not. Yet he mishit nothing. Larwood bowled at his fastest, but had no impact as Bradman picked the gaps with ease by sliding the ball both sides of the wicket with an unorthodox combination of foot and wrist-work. There was a little finesse but no flash. He demonstrated his outstanding skill of piercing a field in a way that frustrated captains and bowlers and threatened to run a fielding side ragged.

The canny packed Yorkshire crowd of 20,000 appreciated the science, brilliance and power of this little man from the former colony. They wondered if he could keep it up for the first session of a Test and secure a hundred, as only two

audacious cricketers had done before. Their names were immortal – Australians Victor Trumper and Charlie Macartney. Trumper had done it with five minutes to spare, Macartney thirteen. Bradman thrilled the spectators and did it in just under thirteen and a half minutes before lunch, with a full-blooded drive through mid-on off Larwood for four. It was the fleetest pre-lunch ton ever.

Bradman was 105 not out as he marched triumphantly from the field. He had struck sixteen fours, and had left the fieldsmen floundering like schoolboys.

AFTERNOON LIGHTNING

At lunch, Bill Woodfull, the Australian captain, spoke to Bradman about ‘going on with it’. After lunch he was subdued, for him. It was clear that he was settling in for something special, picking the loose ball and the gaps with monotony. Bradman embarrassed all the bowlers. No-one looked capable of penetrating his immaculate defence. Nor did any opponent manage to curb the amazing flow from his calibrated placement. At times he seemed to be toying with the bowlers, and he was severe on Larwood, the best fast bowler on either side.

On numerous occasions, the England captain, Percy Chapman, pulled a player from the off, say the covers, and placed him on the leg-side. The next ball, Bradman would step to leg and punch the ball through the spot where the cover had been, leaving Larwood standing mid-pitch, hands on hips and scowling. He would scratch his head, mumble under his breath and plod back to his mark, fuming.

At one point, Bradman repeated such a shot. Larwood consulted with his captain, and the much-travelled fieldsman was taken from mid-wicket and put back at cover. Bradman with flair and dare then carved the ball from the off through mid-wicket where the player had been.

Did he tip his baggy green cap at Larwood in acknowledgement of his opportunity to score? It was not the Australian's style. Yet Larwood, perhaps offended, steamed in with a short ball at Bradman's throat. The batsman moved to the off and hit the ball through mid-wicket again, this time to the boundary with such speed that not one fieldsman moved a foot before the ball was lobbed back from the crowd.

The spectators clapped the brilliance of this play. It wasn't a matter of majestic batting in the Hobbsian way. It was more the precision of the master surgeon. He made his slice and cuts with such unerring and unnerving exactitude that it went beyond judgement of the grace of strokeplay.

He was humiliating the opposition. The impact unbalanced bowlers and fieldsmen alike, for they sensed that his punctilious unpredictability was unstoppable. With all other batsmen in history, such a pace of accumulation led inevitably to a rush of blood, an injudicious cut, loft, or swipe, no matter how skilful. A good captain would make tactical moves and wait for the error. It would come sooner or later with the certainty of the law of averages, which kept the greatest batsmen in Test cricket history on batting averages between 45 and 60, mainly skewed – among the elite of all nations – to around 50.

But the mounting score from Bradman's bat defied all this. He was becoming a batting law unto himself. Yet he didn't just occupy the crease. He played to score the highest number of runs in the shortest possible time, and to stay in the middle until his team was in a winning position. In the process, the psychological effect on the opposition was devastating. Bradman's mastery focused on the mental aspect of cricket – *the* mind game of all ball games. His average of a century for every time he strode to the middle demonstrated not so much a statistical phenomenon, but a cerebral one. The public homage that was already being

paid to this precocious youth was due to his capacity to win the game played inside his head as much as outside it.

The Bradman legend that marvellous day at Leeds was universally in place for the first time. His mentality and temperament were making sure of it.

Since lunch, Larwood had been straying down the leg-side and Bradman was punishing him to such an extent that the captain had to remove him from the bowling crease much earlier than planned, for the *second* time in the game. No observer could recall this happening to Larwood before. And Larwood, enjoying the outfielding not a jot, was fuming. For the first time in his career, he was not rolling his arms over to let his skipper know he wanted to have another go. He had scythed through the best batsmen in England and the world, yet he had never come across such an extraordinary destroyer. By mid-afternoon, one of the game's greatest competitors was beaten and reduced to chasing leather, for it was the boundary riders who did all the pursuing when Bradman was playing.

He mishit a slower ball from Tate at 140 but it lobbed to mid-on, wide of any fieldsmen. The crowd gasped. A buzz went round the ground. Bradman was fallible today after all. But he was still well in as he reached 150 after another seventy minutes. He was now accumulating rather than dominating. Then he accelerated with the fastest fifty so far, in forty minutes.

Bradman went to tea with a score of 220. He had hit another century in a session. His double came up in 214 minutes, the fastest 200 in Test history. There had been one more minor blemish – at 202 – with another miscue to mid-on. Once more, though, the ball was ten metres from a fieldsman. Bradman was not alone in the middle, although he could have been. Support had come from Woodfull (50), who had also been up the other end when Macartney scorched his way to a pre-lunch 100 on the same ground on the previous Australian tour in 1926. Woodfull was bowled

by Hammond at 194. Then Kippax (77) joined Bradman for a 229-run stand, a second-wicket record.

At the short break, Bradman removed his boots, massaged his feet and then fixed himself one of his infamous ‘cuppas’ – an awful concoction consisting of a third of milk in the cup, to which was added half an inch of tea from the pot, and the rest hot water. He had been running hard, often breaking up the field with singles or by pushing ones into twos and twos into threes. He looked fit and relaxed, and even refreshed by his tea. There was nothing overly jut-jawed about his demeanour. Just quiet confidence, clear in his strong, settled face, which was a hint that he would go on all day and into the next.

After Lord’s, Bradman was conscious of his ‘failure’ to beat R. E. Foster’s 287, the highest Test score, without playing to pass it. His main aim was to put Australia into a winning position by stumps by building the biggest score possible.

AT THE OUTER LIMITS

Just after tea, Tate was carved away for successive fours in an over, from which Bradman took 12. Duckworth, the keeper, approached Tate.

‘I thought you could get him out in this country when he plays cross-bat,’ Duckworth said with a rueful grin. It was a telling remark. Players such as Tate and White, and observers including Cardus, Percy Fender and others had told Bradman during the 1928–29 season that he would have to remove his unorthodox shots: the cross-bat pull, his attempts to slide balls from off to on, and even his overuse of the cut. The batsman had taken note. He made his own assessment and ignored the advice.

In the last session Bradman hammered on. Larwood was called on for another stint and the batsman humbled him for the third time in a day. No bowler was spared as he picked

out the weaker and older fieldsmen, such as Jack Hobbs and the rotund Dick Tyldesley, who was a trifle slow. The ball beat him to the boundary many times. Once when Tyldesley picked up a ball near the fence, a supporter called:

‘He’s damned good, isn’t he?’

Without turning around, the sweating, tired bowler replied: ‘He’s no good to me.’

At just a little before 6 p.m. Bradman gave his first real chance of the innings, at 273. He flashed at a faster ball from Geary outside the off-stump and nicked one wide of Duckworth, who dived and got a glove to it, and spilled it. It was a hard catch. Duckworth was angry at himself. Geary stood where he finished his run and looked crestfallen. Bradman by contrast showed his cool as he approached Foster’s record. He smiled then nodded consolingly to the keeper. The England players’ despair was understandable. Not only had they failed to defend their fellow countryman’s record. They had missed one of the main foe’s rare offerings of his wicket. He had given just three chances in the entire series to that Third Test, which had seen him at the crease for fifteen hours. In other words, Bradman offered one opportunity for each day he batted. If the opposition missed it, they suffered.

He cruised past the record with a drive for three. Bradman removed his cap, waved his bat to the spectators’ plaudits, and grinned, a boyish, ingenuous grin. It was the happy look of a youth unencumbered by the burden of greatness which would weigh upon him from now to eternity. The England team, led by Hobbs, shook his hand. He had created sporting history and they were part of it. Still, the Australian’s rewriting of the record books was not finished. Twenty minutes later he pushed a single to mid-on to reach 300, the first cricketer ever to do it in a Test and inside a day.

As Bradman acknowledged the long applause, one East Yorkshire spectator was heard to ask another what he

thought of him.

‘With a bit of practice, he’ll make a cricketer,’ came the response.

The tyro hit a four to finish the day and reached 2,000 for the English season, the youngest player ever to touch that figure.

Bradman was footsore, but happy with his amazing feat (and dancing *feet*) as he strode off the field at 309 not out. He was mobbed by the appreciative crowd and had to be shepherded by police to the pavilion to avoid attempts to shoulder him. The generous Yorkshire fans who thronged in front of the pavilion could have been mistaken for Australians in their enthusiasm. They cheered and chanted his name. Bradman tried to ignore them as he removed his gear and put it with his now priceless red-dotted bat in his bag.

‘They want you on the balcony,’ vice-captain Vic Richardson told him.

Bradman was reticent. ‘I don’t want to go out,’ he said, coyly.

‘They really want you, Don,’ another member of the team urged.

‘All I want is a cup of tea.’

The shy new King of Cricket relaxed teacup in hand as a few well-wishers, important enough to be allowed into the dressing-room, paid homage. Among them was Charlie Macartney, now covering the tour for the *Daily Mirror*.

Bradman relaxed for half an hour and had another cuppa. When the spectators had dispersed, he and the team went to their hotel. Bradman did not celebrate, but shut his door on the world to listen to music, and write. It was his way of winding down. Instead of buying the rest of the team a drink (twelve of the fifteen didn’t touch alcohol) or dinner and enjoying it with them, which was the usual Aussie thing to do, the introspective Bradman showed how he danced to a different tune.

Some took it as a snub, which was partly engendered by envy, for his feats were riveting attention on him, and not the team and other individuals. It was Bradman whom the King of England wanted to meet, Bradman who got the special individual attention, Bradman the young women sent notes to, Bradman the small boys swarmed around in the street seeking autographs. He could have assuaged the envious feelings by celebrating, and being photographed with them raising their cups and glasses. But this was not his style. Bradman was not 'one of the boys' or a drinker. Nor did he wish to make a fuss.

'Was I expected to parade the streets of Leeds?' he asked later. This was put up as 'uncharitable' by jealous detractors. Yet Bradman pointed out that he was contracted to write on the series for the London *Star* and the book publishers Hutchinson. He had disciplined himself to report in a thick diary every night. He was not afraid of his mild intellectual ambitions, which some fellow team members scorned. That particular evening in Leeds, he had a lot on which to report. Just as pertinently, he had the courage to recognise what suited his temperament in bringing the adrenalin down: thinking, writing, music and his own company. Some had to drink, lounge with the lads at the hotel bar, and be seen to be suitably modest. But Bradman wasn't about to say 'Aw shucks, I got lucky'. Everyone knew that the performance he had just delivered was not based on good fortune. Nor was it a one-off. It had been an expression of pure sporting genius.

His own opinion had a ring of integrity about it: 'I consider I was lucky to strike *my best form* on an ideal batsman's wicket.'

His *best form* was not dependent on the roll of the dice. When he struck it, he would dominate anything thrown at him, and for longer and with more skill than anyone else. No false modesty there – just thoughts honestly, directly put,

always with a quiet message to his opponents. *Every so often he would strike his best form* . . .

The morning papers waxed lyrical about the Olympian feat of the previous day. The *Daily Express's* Trevor Wignall summed up their collective thinking:

> *There are still those who question Bradman's right to be described as the most marvellous batsman of his time. He may not have the correctness of Hobbs or the perfect artistry of Woolley and Duleepsinhji, but what does that matter when he can get runs against the best bowling in England in the manner of shelling peas?*
>
> *I can easily remember such stars as Spooner, Ranjitsinhji, Trumper and others of the truly great, but no one of them was better than this astonishing boy from a hamlet in Australia. If he has a fault at all it is that he makes cricket look too much like child's play. . .*

Asked by a journalist about how many he would like to make in the innings, Bradman replied: 'If I thought about it at all it was that the morrow could look after itself.'

As it was, if Bradman were taken at his word, there was little incentive left on the morrow. His stated aim was to bat for the team and at three for 458 Australia was in a very strong position. Foster's record, made in 1903, was now Bradman's.

At 334 he nicked one to a grateful Duckworth off Tate. It had not been a cross-bat stroke. It was his fifth century in six Tests, and he had kept the sequence of scoring higher each time. Even Bradman, with his silent obsession of run accumulation and calculation, knew that he had reached the outer limits.

Where did he acquire his skills, confidence and cool character? For answers we must go back almost to Australia's beginning as a nation when this extraordinary sportsman was born.

2

THE BOY FROM BOWRAL

I would describe his batting as practically a freak. There is no other term that adequately describes it.
— GEORGE BRADMAN, FATHER

A VERY FAIR BAT

THERE IS A billboard outside the little sheep and wheat country town of Cootamundra, 350 kilometres southwest of Sydney, which reads: ‘Never Stumped in Cootamundra.’ It’s a discreet reference to the fact that Donald George Bradman, arguably the most famous and popular Australian ever, was born there on 27 August 1908. The Bradman family home, a humble cottage with a lawn and no garden, has been preserved as a museum in this quiet place, which seems to have no distinctive atmosphere, at least to those passing through. Travel writers have complained that there isn’t even a decent pub to speak of. Cootamundra is a no-nonsense sort of town, caught in a rural time warp that prevailed when George and Emily Bradman added Donald George to their family of three daughters and a son.

Bradman’s paternal grandfather, Charles, a farm labourer, emigrated from Cambridgeshire in England in 1852 to Australia with nearly 100,000 other free-settlers in that year, attracted by the news of gold discoveries in the

colonies. They offered an incentive to escape agricultural depression in England and Charles, too, made the journey to the great south land halfway round the world.

The bold move was worthwhile for the Bradman lineage. Charles improved on his circumstance in the UK and became a respected small farmer in the Cootamundra district, marrying Elizabeth Biffen, whose family were sheep and dairy farmers. Their youngest surviving son of six children was George, who married Emily Whatman. Both her farmer parents were NSW-born, and like Bradman's grandparents, were of British stock. George continued the Bradman/Whatman farming tradition around Cootamundra, but also had a knack with machinery which proved helpful to his neighbours, who were often baffled by the new mechanical developments.

Early in 1911, Emily's prolonged ill-health caused the Bradmans to move closer to her family in Bowral, also southwest of Sydney but only 130 kilometres away in the southern highlands. Its 720-metre altitude made it a popular tourist and health resort. The transposition did the trick for Emily, whose condition soon improved.

George found work as a carpenter. The large family struggled, but got by. Both families had a great love of music and sport, dating back to their forebears' days in East Anglia, and in particular cricket. Just about all of them could play a musical instrument and most, the women included, liked nothing more than to get out with a bat and ball in the back-yard with varying degrees of skill. Such was the rhythm of leisure time for the young Don. In the summer it was the violin and the piano, cricket, tennis and athletics. In the winter the sport changed to rugby, but the music remained. The Bradman/Whatman families took their sport a step further and played for the town. It was inevitable that any child with a modicum of talent would slip into games. The easiest of all to commence and compete in was cricket.

BRANCHING OUT

Don Bradman first held a bat at the age of five – a piece of gumtree branch fashioned like a baseball bat by his father. He showed nothing exceptional early, except two characteristics that he would never lose, and which went some way to lifting him above the average. The child would listen and concentrate. The instruction was limited early, for George, although he played for Bowral in the local competition, was not much interested in technique. The game was played for fun, not the drudgery of being taught orthodoxy.

At eight his father judged him ‘a very fair bat’, and that was it. He had a good eye, and had mastered the simple yet essential elements of footwork by watching. No-one instructed him that by the one movement of *back and across* he would have that extra fraction of a second to play a shorter ball, or that by moving his front foot forward towards the fuller-pitched ball he could master the delivery. The boy Don was an instinctive pragmatist. No matter that the back-foot movement led to an unorthodox whack to all points of the compass, or that the forward thrust would see the ball shoot off to leg or leg to off. No-one screamed ‘straight bat’. No coach threw up his hands in horror at the ingenuity needed to avoid smashing a house window. That ingenuity would gradually, without anyone taking notice for years, become ingeniousness. Bradman’s cleverness at contriving a way through any field-placing would be one of his trademarks. He worked out early that the way to win was to make the most number of runs in the shortest possible time, which at the age of eight was before Mum, who occasionally joined the games herself, called him in for the evening meal.

Ever since making a fifty in the back-yard, the prodigy would be transported to a singular world as a rhythm

developed in his mind, which carried an easy mix of numbers and shot calculations as his score mounted. It was no coincidence that Bradman most liked mathematics as a school subject. Any natural inclination to the subject was intensified as he accumulated runs in what fast became his favourite sport. He liked tennis and was excellent at it. He was a tenacious rugby player, and a winner at every school race from 100 yards to the half-mile. But the challenge in cricket to Bradman was a combination of the ball skills needed for tennis, the tenacity required for rugby, the speed and endurance that were a must for athletics, and the mental acumen needed to play consistently well. Above all it was a mind game, whether confronting, engaging with and finally dominating a bowler, or creating a strategy for victory. That excited him. His will to win every competition he stepped into was apparent from the beginning.

A TANK OF OPPORTUNITY

Bradman learned early to be at ease with his own company, because there were few little mates close to his home. So like countless children before and since, he improvised, by devising ball games for one. In the winter he picked imaginary football teams and played matches in the back-yard with a footy. The garage door proved a useful rebound surface for make-believe tennis games.

But it was cricket which drew out his real creativity. He put together international teams in his head consisting of the stars from Trumper to Hobbs, for whom he would act as a proxy bat or bowler depending on their nationality. The unbounded arena of his dreams centred on an 800-gallon (3,600-litre) water tank at the back of his home, which stood on a forty-five-centimetre-high circular brick stand.

‘From the tank to the laundry door was a distance of eight feet [2.5 metres],’ Bradman noted with typical precision in

his autobiography, *Farewell to Cricket.* ‘The area under-foot was cemented and, with all doors shut, this portion was enclosed on three sides and roofed over.’

The boy’s imaginary Tests in his modest stadium were at least not stopped by rain, so the games went on for hours with just a stump and a golf ball. With the door behind him as an outsize wicket, he would throw the ball at varying speed and height at the brick stand and hit it on the rebound for six and four, or a catch. The young Bradman didn’t realise it at the time, but the ball was often bouncing at him as fast as anything he would ever face in his career.

Day in, day out, whatever the weather through endless summers, he was learning to hook, pull, cut, late cut, drive, glance and off-drive with a thin, round stump. The on-drive was curtailed because he would play this into an open area, which necessitated a tiresome chase. Bradman discovered he had to keep his eye on the unpredictable ball, so that a last split-second head or body movement would avoid being hit. If he looked away through fear, the fast-moving golf ball would strike him. He found that the faster he played, the quicker his reflexes reacted until he was soon, when ‘settled’ into an innings for, say, the famous Test player Jack Gregory, engrossed in a feverish concentration of shots and additions as the score mounted, mainly in fours. A modern equivalent would be a child captivated by video games, which need supreme concentration and can develop brain-eye coordination. But such games don’t account for the *physical* involvement of scores of coordinated muscles.

If the little Bradman had had a playmate, it would probably have been with a bat, tennis or hard ball in a park, and he would have received one-tenth of the bowls at him over a much shorter period. The deliveries would have been much less challenging.

If there is one circumstance in Bradman’s life that accentuated and elicited innate skills, which would lead him on to true greatness, it was having to face that bland and

unprepossessing water tank. Necessity never led to greater invention in sporting history.

For variety, he would wander into a neighbouring paddock and throw a tennis ball, or an even more challenging golf ball, at a rounded rail on a fence from about thirteen metres away. The ball would fly back at various angles. He would catch it and hurl it back. If he missed the rail, it meant a trudge into the paddock. Bradman played a similar game on his walk home from school. Every telegraph pole and picket fence became a target for his best training mate, that fickle little golf ball, which sometimes deserted him when he missed the target and ended up in undergrowth, bush or drain. You could set a clock to the rattle of fence palings as the young Don bounced, leapt, caught and chased his way home. Again, over the years all this trained him to catch, and disciplined his accuracy. Bradman was not alone among kids around the world in devising techniques for solo catching practice. The factors which set him apart from 99.9 per cent of them were his capacity for prolonged concentration, his innate reflexes and his athleticism.

Unlike many cricketers who would go on to be outstanding, Bradman was a natural athlete. His average stature (he would grow to about 5ft 7 in – 172 cm) was irrelevant. The key was natural fitness and muscular agility. He was a near-perfect physical specimen, who could turn to sports from golf to squash with equal facility.

The local primary school (for ages five to ten) and then the intermediate high school allowed Bradman to interact with other kids in the daily summer scratch matches before class, at lunch-break and after school, but there were no facilities for organised games. Nor was there coaching. The headmaster was keen and joined in, but he distributed his limited thoughts on finer points among all the willing students. So while Bradman was *behind* in his experience at the age of nine compared with say England’s W. G. Grace, who by that stage had actually played a county game, or

Australia's Victor Trumper, who was performing in sub-district cricket when only a few years older, he was not getting orthodox instruction. There were advisers including his father, uncles and family friends, but no-one was telling him how to grip the bat, stand, place his feet, or play strokes. Cricket was played in the country for amusement, a summer pastime for everyone from workers and tradesmen to farmers and professionals.

If Bradman was taught anything, it was to enjoy himself while always trying to win. This partly explained his constant half-smile when on the field, which would later irritate his opponents at all levels when he destroyed bowling attacks. Until they knew him and his manner, some took that country boy grin as gloating.

HUCK FINN HEAVEN

At eleven, during the week, Bradman was a healthy mix of diligent student, practising choirboy for the local Anglican church, pianist and sporting all-rounder. (His parents were not particularly religious, but they instilled in him a strong sense of Christian principles.) Saturday night entertainment was self-generated in the Bradman home, the centrepiece being the piano, with recitals being given or the family and invited neighbours singing popular numbers. Bradman's father George played the violin, his sister Lillian the piano and the accordion. Lillian, a professional piano teacher, taught Don to play. She and the family regarded him as gifted, although Bradman did not regard himself this way. Yet his future wife Jessie, who had already observed him at close quarters at this time, later recalled: 'He could listen to a piece his sister was playing and immediately perform it by ear.'

On weekends he turned Huck Finn and loved walking for kilometres with his father, brother and uncles on rabbit-

shooting expeditions or fishing in the local creek. Like many Aussie boys of the era, his early experiences gave him a maturity unheard of today. Given a gun and a rod, he could have survived in the outback alone. In many ways, he was already a young man when he played his first real cricket match.

Eleven was about the age most budding young Australians stepped off the street or out of the back-yard and started their ‘official’ underage careers at school. This was their moment of truth. It was one thing to make a blinding fifty between the clothes line and the back fence or on the lawn in the street. It was another to see a *real* opposition team, with adult umpires, and play an organised school game with a real wicket and bails, all on a proper field. The pitch was the only concession to those endless scratch matches. It was simply a level bit of dirt.

So it was for the bright, young Don when he strode out on a recreational area called Glebe Park Oval (which would later become known as Bradman Oval). Bradman admitted to some nerves at that moment. It was his first game and he came to the wicket on a hattrick. A swift left-hander had bowled an opener and dismissed the next boy. The score was two for none. The diminutive, ‘none too confident’ Don took block. At that moment, the quick-fire double centuries made as proxy for Macartney in front of that stolid water tank counted for nothing. He surveyed the field as if in a Test. In came that tall leftie from an exaggerated run. He bowled a fast straight one, which missed the bails by the proverbial coat of varnish, leaving the batsboy pushing forward. Bradman had expected to hear the worst sound for someone at the crease – the death rattle of the stumps and bails crashing behind him. But it didn’t come. If he had made a duck, it would have been of little consequence to the future, except that the bowler would have gone down in history for getting Bradman for nought first ball in the first match he ever played in. As it was, that initial performance

was the first sign that there just *might* be something special in the quiet little kid with the funny grip. Bradman proceeded to carve up the bowling while wickets fell about him. He ended with 55 not out, more than half the team's score.

I recall a player named Ken Jungwirth of that age in my team at Murrumbeena State School in Melbourne making exactly the same score in a primary school final. It was an exceptional effort. An astute observer would have judged that such a performance would separate the player from others in temperament and skill. Such a performer would *probably* play cricket at, say, district or club level – a level just below first-class in Australia – which was far higher than ordinary park or village green standard in England.

At eleven, that is where the young Don stood. He could be judged as *good*, nothing more or less . . . yet.

ENTER THE GREAT PARTNER

In 1920, aged eleven, Don Bradman first encountered an attractive blue-eyed daughter of a farmer from nearby Glenquarry, named Jessie Menzies. They met at the home of Don's parents soon after he had ridden his bike into a car backing out of a driveway. Don, nose bloodied and shaken, was introduced to the ten-year-old Jessie, who happened to be visiting his home at that time. They became good friends.

'I wanted to marry her in my late teens,' Bradman said of the attractive, vivacious, wavy-haired brunette, 'but I was too shy to ask.'

Jessie was equally in love with the young Don. During interviews for this book, in the Bradman home in Adelaide's leafy Kensington Park, the 86-year-old Jessie (since 1949, Lady Bradman) seemed fit and vibrant despite the effects of